

A Faith That Works: If The Lord Wills

James 4:13-17

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on August 2, 2020

Introduction

- ❖ This morning, our theme is the will of God – his good and perfect will. And the goodness and perfection of his will is on full display this morning – in the way in which God has providentially willed for this passage to be preached during this prolonged time of pandemic. **In our text, we are warned about the uncertainty of our earthly plans.** No matter how careful or diligent we are – no matter how well-thought-out or strategic our plans – none of us controls the future. Which means our plans can be easily disrupted and derailed.
 - Today, I doubt there is a single person on the planet who would disagree with that. This pandemic has spread to the four corners of the earth and affected everyone's life. **We've all felt the loss that comes with having your life plans blow up in your face.** How rare is that? To have everyone on Earth going through the same thing at the same time?

- ❖ Friends, don't let this providential moment pass you by. I believe God is sending the world a clear wake-up call. Reminding us that we are not the lords of our lives. I know it's easy to think so. **The allusion of control is so tempting in a modern world.** We can control the temperature of our homes. We can control the flow of electricity as well. We can control a two-ton vehicle traveling at 70mph, and nowadays we can even control it to control itself.
 - Through advancements in medicine, agriculture, and technology, we've alleviated so much human hardship and suffering. We have prolonged life and enhanced it. Considering all that we have gained as a civilization, you can see why it's easy to accept the allusion of control. We assume we are in control of our lives.
 - **But all it takes is another 'once in 500-years' flood to hit or another global pandemic to shake us from that allusion.** And to remind us of how little control we possess and how our lives are at the whim of forces much greater than ourselves.

- ❖ Some of you planned for summer jobs that never materialized. Some of you planned for wedding ceremonies and receptions that had to be altered. Some of you planned for summer vacations that were completely scuttled. Some of our missionaries planned to have returned to the field by now or to have been sent out, but conditions have changed and now they're stuck in limbo. And as we're all aware, schools, workplaces, and churches keep planning for a return to campus, but those plans keep getting postponed and pushed back.

- ❖ **That's why this is the perfect time to preach this text because all of us are primed to listen to what it has to say.** No one would deny the relevancy of this passage. No one can say it doesn't apply to them. All of us are ready to hear what James has to say.
 - In chapter 4:13-17, he essentially has two exhortations. First, he's going to tell us what we ought *not* to say when making plans. And second, what we ought to say when making those plans. **Now James is definitely concerned with what we say – how we use our tongues – but his deeper concern is what our words reveal about our hearts, about our attitude towards the Lord.**

What We Ought Not to Say

- ❖ Let's start by considering **what we ought not to say when making plans**. Look with me at v13, "*Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit".*" **Here James is speaking to wealthier members of the church likely in the merchant class, which explains why they would be making plans to travel and trade for business.**

- ❖ If you recall, James had addressed rich Christians back in chapter 1:10-11. **There he warned them against boasting in their worldly pursuits and said how they instead should be boasting in their humble status in Christ.** Listen to that text again, "*¹⁰And (let) the rich (boast) in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.*"
 - You can hear similar themes in our passage. There's a similar tone of warning or rebuke, a reminder of how our lives are like a passing mist, and a strong exhortation to humble ourselves before the Lord.

- ❖ **James begins in v13 with a hypothetical (but realistic) illustration of self-confident Christians** – who speak of traveling on this particular date, to that particular location, for this amount of time, to accomplish this or that.
 - It's no different than hearing a Christian today say something like, "I'm going to graduate from this college in three years, finish that graduate program in four, and then get a job in this city with that company." Or maybe you might hear someone say, "My plan is to get married by this age." Or "In three years, we're going to start a family and have this many kids."
 - **James will point out three problems with that kind of speech – that way of talking about future plans.** There is (a) the assumption of such speech, (b) the foolishness of such speech, and (c) the sinfulness of such speech.

- ❖ Let's consider first **the assumption** behind that way of talking about future plans. **When you talk that way, you're assuming that you're in control of your plans.** That you have the power to bring them to fruition. **You've embraced that illusion of control.** That's the kind of presumption that James is warning about.

- ❖ **Now let's be clear: James is *not* forbidding his readers from making any plans for the future.** He's not suggesting that any form of goal setting or financial planning is wrongheaded. In fact, you could turn to various Scriptures to support the setting aside of savings for the future or the purchasing of insurance as a way to mitigate loss after some unforeseen event (Prov 6:6-11; 21:5, 20). To plan for the future in these ways is not necessarily an act of unfaithfulness. It could be a very responsible act of stewardship.

- ❖ James' main concern is not the making of plans in itself – just as he's not concerned with the words themselves in v13 – **but he is concerned with the foolish allusion of control that's lurking behind those words, behind those plans.** So, friends, if you happen to find yourself speaking like that person in v13, then most likely you've assumed, consciously or not, that you're in control of your plans, of your future.
- ❖ But that leads to the second problem with that way of talking. James raises concerns in v14 with **the foolishness** of such speech. Let me read it, *“yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”* **The point is that such self-confident pronouncements about our future plans is foolish in the way that it overlooks the nature of life in a fallen world.**
- ❖ James highlights, first of all, **the uncertainty of life.** We don't know what tomorrow will bring. I don't need to spend much time convincing any of you that life is uncertain. No one could've predicted this pandemic. And no one can predict what major, life-altering, catastrophe is coming next. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?
 - **Proverbs 27:1** says *“Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.”* **That means don't brag about what you're going to do tomorrow, when you don't know how this day will end.** Maybe with some unexpected joy? Maybe with an unforeseen sorrow? We don't know. That's the uncertainty of life.
- ❖ Next, James emphasizes **the brevity of life.** *“What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.”* Picture the morning mist and how quickly it disappears with the morning sun. That's how fleeting our life is when compared to the endless span of eternity. In **Job 7:7**, he describes his life as a breath. **Psalm 39:5** affirms the same, *“Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath!”*
 - Think of those (not so common) days in Houston when the weather gets cold enough to see your breath – as it passes through the air and fades away. Such is your life. **Picture your life as a single drop in the ocean of eternity.** A speck in the infinite reach of the cosmos. It's foolishness to act like we will live forever or to presume there will be more time to pursue our dreams and fulfill our plans. Life is a vapor.
- ❖ And overall in v14, what James is stressing is **the fragility of life.** One day, life, as we know it, just vanishes. It's gone like that. The allusion of control can be quickly shattered by an unexpected illness, a sudden accident, or even the imminent return of Christ. Life is so fragile and can be cut short in an instant – along with all our unfulfilled plans.
 - **That parable we read earlier in Luke 12 speaks to the uncertainty, brevity, and fragility of life.** The rich fool assumed the allusion of control. He rested in the assumption that he had ample goods laid for many years, so he could sit back and relax and eat, drink, and be merry. *“But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’”* This fool's big plans were cut short by an untimely death. Don't be like this fool and pronounce your plans with self-confident certainty. It's pure foolishness.

- ❖ But it's actually worse than that. It's not just foolishness – it's sinfulness. In vv16-17, James exposes **the sinfulness** of such speech – of talking this way about your plans.
 - Listen to v16, “*As it is* (referring back to this saying in v13), *you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.*” **James rightly diagnoses that behind our self-confident pronouncements of future plans is a prideful self-sufficiency.** We're claiming the ability to control outcomes. We're claiming sovereignty to an extent. We're rejecting the Lord and boasting in our prideful self-sufficiency.

- ❖ Now you might be thinking, “Okay, that's a bit harsh. Sure, I admit that I've been making a lot of life plans without really consulting the Lord. And maybe I've spoken with an air of certainty about my plans for the next few months or years. But I wasn't trying to reject the Lord. I wasn't suggesting that I don't need him or that his will doesn't matter.”
 - Look, I get it. You didn't set out to reject the Lord or deny his will. That wasn't your intent. **But you have to realize that's essentially what you're doing when you plow forward with your plans without consideration of his will.**

- ❖ That's the point that James gets at in v17, “*So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.*” I know, at first glance, this warning seems to come out of nowhere. James is talking about sins of omission (failing to do the right thing), which is in contrast to sins of commission (actively doing the wrong thing).
 - But since he begins v17 with “*So*” or “*Therefore*” – he's clearly not changing the subject. **By referencing sins of omission, James is saying that our passive dismissal of the Lord and his will – in the course of making plans – is a sinful act.** Sure, we may not be actively rejecting his will – but it's a sin of omission. It's a sinful act of blasphemy nonetheless.

- ❖ I know that sounds harsh, but you have to realize that this kind of speech – and the prideful self-sufficiency behind it – exposes a kind of **functional atheism** that has come to dominate our way of life. We claim to believe in God. We say we need God. But then we live as if we don't. We don't factor him or his will into our plans.

- ❖ Friends, examine yourself to see if this is true of you. **You say you're a Christian, but are you functioning as an atheist – at least in this regard?** When you're setting goals and making plans for your life – is your approach distinguishable from someone who doesn't believe in God? **Or are you both approaching it with the mindset that as long as you have sensible expectations, take good advice, work hard, and don't easily quit – then you can achieve pretty much anything you put your mind to?**
 - If that's your methodology, just realize that that's no different than worldly wisdom. I think you know the right thing to do. **You know that, as a Christian, your faith in God, your trust in his will – has to factor in when making decisions and forming plans.** But if you fail to do that, then for you, it's a sin. It's not just a simple oversight. It's not just a failure to say the right words. This overall approach to making plans is a heart issue. It's revealing a prideful self-sufficiency that we should repent of.

What We Ought to Say

- ❖ And after we repent and freshly receive the grace of forgiveness that God freely offers through faith in Christ, then we ought to re-approach our plans and figure out **what we ought to say when making plans** from now on. James tells us in v15, *“Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.’”*
 - I want us to consider three things: (a) the addendum to our plans, (b) the attitude towards our plan, and (c) the foundation of our plans. Let’s start with **the addendum to our plans** – the addition to should include when speaking of our best-laid plans. James says you ought to add, *“If the Lord wills.”* Go ahead and make your plans. Exercise due diligence. Strategize. Consult. Do what it takes to come up with well-thought-out plans. But in the end, commit your works to the Lord (Prov 16:3). Roll those plans into his sovereign hands.

- ❖ That’s what you’re implying whenever you say *“If the Lord wills.”* You determined your will. It’s in the form of whatever plan you have in place. **But these words indicate that you’ve submitted your will under the Lord’s will.** You’ve accept that your plans are subject to change as the Lord carries out his sovereign will.
 - This is how the Apostles spoke when they spoke of their plans. There are plenty of examples in the NT. In **Acts 18:21**, the Apostle Paul tells the Ephesians that he plans to return. *“But on taking leave of them he said, ‘I will return to you if God wills.’”* In **1 Corinthians 4:19**, he says he’s coming to visit soon, *“But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills.”* He reemphasizes his travel plans at the end of the letter in **chapter 16:7**, *“I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.”* (Rom 1:10; 15:32)

- ❖ That’s how the apostles would speak. It just came natural to them. If the Lord wills, we’ll do this. God willing, we’ll do that. We’ll pursue these goals and accomplish these plans, if the Lord permits.
 - Now let’s be clear: **There’s nothing magical about these words.** We should be careful *not* to regard them so highly that we treat *“If the Lord wills”* as some sort of incantation with power in itself. But at the same time, we shouldn’t regard these words so lightly that they turn into yet another cliché for Christians.

- ❖ **I think there’s still much to be gained – there is spiritual benefit – when we incorporate some variation of these words into our vernacular, especially when speaking about future plans or future events.** It’s how Christians in the past communicated with each other.
 - If you read letters between Puritans in the 17th-century or evangelicals during the Great Awakening, you’ll come across a popular Latin phrase: ***Deo Volente***. It means God-willing. You’ll see the initials D.V. written at the end of their letters to each other or in publications announcing an upcoming event or activity. It was second nature for them to say God-willing or write D.V. It wasn’t an incantation and neither was it a cliché. **It was an expression of faith and a humble resignation to God’s will.**

- ❖ That's the point. It's not about a slogan. If they're empty words, then forget about it. But if we're intentional to incorporate this kind of language into our everyday talk – it will help, Lord-willing, to shape our **attitude towards our plans**.
 - **The more conscious I am that I can't do anything without the Lord's permission – apart from his will – then the more I'm grounded I am.** It undercuts my prideful self-sufficiency. And leads to a humble resignation to the Lord's will for my life. **Only if he wills will my plans come to fruition.** I need to be constantly reminded of that. That's why it's a good thing to say some variation of *Deo Volente, God-willing*.

- ❖ The 2nd-century church father **Tertullian**, in one of his writings, describes how a victorious Roman general would return to Rome in a triumphal procession. Everyone would turn out, and there would be great fanfare and celebration. The entire army would parade in and slaves would carry in all the bounty and spoils of war. **In the midst of this triumphal procession, the general would have a slave standing behind him, holding a crown over his head, and whispering continually into his ear, "Remember, you're only a man."**
 - The Romans understood the formative power of words to shape our attitude. It wasn't a slogan or cliché. It was a needed reminder that we are not gods. We are only mortal. So when we say the words – *God-willing, If the Lord wills, If he permits* – we are reminding ourselves that we are only mortal. We're not lords of our lives. **We're only creatures whose fragile lives and tenuous plans wholly depend on the Lord.**

- ❖ When we add, "*If the Lord wills*" to our speech, it communicates to ourselves and to anyone listening that **the foundation of our plans** rests on God alone. **It's a way to proclaim that our confidence in the face of an uncertain future rests – not in our ability to accomplish our plans – but in the certainty that God can and will always accomplish his own.**
 - Just think about our plans. What tends to thwart our best-laid plans? It could be due to **unrealistic expectations** at the start. We were aiming too high. We lacked a realistic assessment of our own abilities or of the resources at our disposal. Another factor that commonly stifles our plans are **unforeseen circumstances**. Something comes out of nowhere throwing a wrench into our plans. Or maybe it's **unwanted opposition**. For our plans to succeed it requires everyone else's compliance, and yet they have their own plans that don't necessarily align with ours. And then, of course, what can ruin any plan is **an untimely death**, especially our own.

- ❖ Unrealistic expectations, unforeseen circumstances, unwanted opposition, an untimely death – these are all obstacles that would frustrate any plan of ours. But this is where Christianity offers good news. **Think about it – every one of these obstacles tried to frustrate Christ and his plans to redeem sinners for God.**
 - But there were no **expectations** too high for the Son of God to handle. There were no **circumstances** that he couldn't foresee – that caught him off guard. He faced **opposition**, but none of his opponents were unwanted. He wanted each of them and would've received them as friends if they were only willing.

- And yes, he succumbed to **death**, but it was far from untimely. It occurred at the right time, at the fullness of time. He was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23).

- ❖ **Christ accomplished all of his plans to redeem sinners. Not a single plan was frustrated. Not a single goal went unfulfilled.** That, my friends, is the ground of our hope. That's the foundation of our plans. Whenever we say we'll do this or that, *if the Lord wills* – we're saying we believe God's will is good and gracious *because* of what Jesus accomplished.
 - So even if at times our will is *not* done – and even if *his* will leads us along the path of suffering, along the Calvary road – we can still count it all joy and truly tell him, “*Not my will but your will be done.*” That's the foundation of all our plans.
- ❖ I'd like to speak a word to **those of you who are not Christians**, who are still figuring out what you believe. **I hope you come away with a sober warning to take more seriously the uncertainty, the brevity, and the fragility of life.** You don't know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life but a mist? Have you seriously considered these things?
 - Perhaps many of your plans have been successful. And maybe your plans to secure your future or your family's future are going as planned. **But what I want to know is if you've made any plans yet for life after death?** Why would you expend so much effort making plans for this life – but neglect to make plans for your eternal future?
- ❖ Now maybe you'll say, “Because there's no certainty that an eternal future exists. There's no guarantee that such plans for life after death are certain.” **But isn't that always the case for all of our future plans? Nothing about your future is certain and yet you make plans anyways.** I'm pleading with you to keep the same logic and make plans for life after death.
 - You do that by turning to Jesus. Ask him to be merciful to you. Ask him to save you from your sins and to secure your eternal future when this fleeting life is done. Ask Jesus. He won't refuse you. That's the promise of the gospel.
- ❖ Now to those of you who are Christians, let me remind you that one of the blessings of the gospel is knowing that your future is secure in Christ. **The more you rest in that truth, the more you're released of that pressure to make sure all your plans come to fruition.**
 - We should be like royal children who are free to pursue their plans without any undue pressure. They don't worry about the future. Because even if their plans fail – they know their inheritance is secure. Well, that's how a Christian should feel when making plans for the future. **We can enjoy that same freedom to not worry about failed plans – because our inheritance in Christ is secure.**
- ❖ And we won't have that sense of entitlement that's often found among earthly royals – **because we know we're not entitled to anything.** We know we're undeserving sinners, and that our inheritance is all of grace. Make your plans and trust them into the hands of the Lord. **If he wills, they will be done. But either way, you can trust the King of kings who happens to be your Father in heaven.**